

Asceticism

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1 Corinthians 9:27 “*But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection...*” Paul was talking about ruling his beast. You are all familiar with this concept, as it is the topic of lesson 53. And if you remember from that lesson, the beast inside of you is no different than a horse with you as the rider. Your horse may want to go his own way, but you must establish control over him and teach him that YOU are the rider and HE is the horse. You do this by being consistent in your correction and your encouragement.

Most people today are led away by their beasts. Their god is their belly (**Philippians 3:18-19**), and they have not attained mastery over it. How many times have you wanted one of those shiny things at the check-out counter? The whole reason they are put there is to tempt your beast into buying them. Your beast sees them and says, “Hey, I want that! It’s small and inexpensive; what’s the harm? Besides, you haven’t bought anything lately just because you wanted it, so you DESERVE it!” Most people just give into their beasts, but we are here to learn how to rule our beast, and that means DENYING your beast things that it wants.

The act of denying yourself and controlling your impulses is called asceticism, and it’s not a new idea. One Greek philosopher who taught people how to live the ascetic life was Epictetus. His most notable work is called “The Golden Sayings” or “Enchiridion”.

He starts with a basic statement: “Some things are in our power, others are not.” The things in our power are the things we can control, such as our own acts and opinions. The things not in our power are the things we cannot control, such as the acts and opinions of others.

When you are disturbed by something, you are not disturbed by the thing itself, but by your opinion of the thing. “for example, death is nothing terrible, for if it were, it would have seemed so to Socrates; for the opinion about death, that it is terrible, is the terrible thing, then, we are impeded or disturbed or grieved, let us never blame others, but ourselves, that is, our opinions.” (Epictetus, 5)

It is our beast’s perception of a thing, and emotional response to it, that causes us to be disturbed by things that happen. He advises us to “Seek not that the things which happen should happen as you wish; but wish the things which happen to be as they are, and you will have a tranquil flow of life.” (Epictetus, 8) In other words, don’t try to change things that happen, but rather accept them as they are, and you will not be troubled by them.

When anything happens to you, “remember to turn to yourself and inquire what power you have for turning it to use. If you see a fair man or a fair woman, you will find that the power to resist is temperance. If pain be presented to you, you will find that it is endurance. If it be abusive words, you will find it to be patience.” (Epictetus, 10) In every situation, you can find some way to make it useful for your own improvement.

“Remember that it is not he who reviles you or strikes you, who insults you, but it is your opinion about these things as being insulting. When, then, a man irritates you, you must know that it is your own opinion which has irritated you.” (Epictetus, 20)

Epictetus advises people to first consider how to do something, counting the cost, and then follow through with it. Otherwise you will become like those who go from one hobby or interest to another, without mastering any. Therefore, he says, do not undertake anything without consideration; do not do anything carelessly. Consider your own abilities and character and any difficulties or trials you might experience by pursuing this thing. Remember, “*he who rules his spirit is better than he who takes a city*” (**Proverbs 16:32**).

He says that you shouldn’t go to the theater often, but if you go, do not shout or laugh or display any violent emotions. When you leave, do not talk much about what happened on the stage, except that which may lead to your own improvement. Because talking about it a lot reveals that you enjoyed the play more than you should have. Do not spend too much time on physical, external things, but instead “let all your care be directed to the mind” (Epictetus, 42)

“Do not, however, be disagreeable to those who indulge in these pleasures, or reprove them; and do not often boast that you do not indulge in them yourself.” (Epictetus, 34) Boasting that you do not indulge in certain activities is an emotional, beast-driven response, and it is no better than if you had indulged in the activities themselves.

When you enjoy something, be careful not to be carried away with it. “But let the thing wait for you, and allow yourself a certain delay on your own part. Then think of both times, of the time when you will enjoy the pleasure, and of the time after the enjoyment of the pleasure when you will repent and will reproach yourself. And set against these things how you will rejoice if you have abstained from the pleasure, and how you will commend yourself. But if it seem to you reasonable to do the thing, take care that the charm of it, and the pleasure, and the attraction of it shall not conquer you: but set on the other side the consideration how much better it is to be conscious that you have gained this victory.” (Epictetus, 35)

Before doing anything, first consider the pros and cons of it – the joy you will have by experiencing it as well as the remorse you will feel afterwards for having enjoyed it when perhaps you shouldn’t have done it. If you abstain from doing it, you will have another kind of joy – that of having resisted the temptation to do it, thus gaining a victory over yourself. Do not act hastily – first weigh the joy against the remorse, and determine if you should do it or not.

“If a man has reported to you, that a certain person speaks ill of you, do not make any defense to what has been told you: but reply, The man did not know the rest of my faults, for he would not have mentioned these only.” (Epictetus, 34) And if you desire to change yourself, you should prescribe to yourself the character you will observe when alone or with others, and then do it.

Do not talk about theory, but rather be an example to others of how it works. If a subject comes up which you know nothing about, be silent, otherwise you may vomit up what little you do understand. (Epictetus, 47) This sounds a little bit like the Proverb: “*Whoso keepeth his mouth and his tongue keepeth his soul from troubles*” (**Proverbs 21:23**).

“If you ever wish to exercise yourself in labor and endurance, do it for yourself, and not for others. But if you are ever very thirsty, take a drink of cold water, and spit it out, and tell no man.” (Epictetus, 48)

When you gain a victory over your beast, do not boast about it; then your victory has less value. No one else needs to know about it – you are ruling your beast for your own improvement.

“Immediately, then, think it right to live as a full-grown man, and one who is making proficiency, and let everything which appears to you to be the best be to you a law which must not be transgressed. And if anything laborious, or pleasant or glorious or inglorious be presented to you, remember that now is the contest, now are the Olympic games, and they cannot be deferred; and that it depends on one defeat and one giving way that progress is either lost or maintained.” (Epictetus, 51)

NOW are the Olympic games – you against your beast. One defeat is all it takes to slide down the mountain and back into the world. So you must continue to make progress and rule your beast by determining what is the right course of action, and live by it like it is a law which you cannot break.

Seneca, a Roman philosopher alive during the life of Christ, says, “We are all chained to fortune: the chain of one is made of gold, and wide, while that of another is short and rusty. But what difference does it make? The same prison surrounds all of us, and even those who have bound others are bound themselves; unless perchance you think that a chain on the left side is lighter. Honors bind one man, wealth another; nobility oppresses some, humility others; some are held in subjection by an external power, while others obey the tyrant within; banishments keep some in one place, the priesthood others. All life is slavery. Therefore each one must accustom himself to his own condition and complain about it as little as possible, and lay hold of whatever good is to be found near him. Nothing is so bitter that a calm mind cannot find comfort in it. Small tablets, because of the writer’s skill, have often served for many purposes, and a clever arrangement has often made a very narrow piece of land habitable. Apply reason to difficulties; harsh circumstances can be softened, narrow limits can be widened, and burdensome things can be made to press less severely on those who bear them cleverly.”

Some people’s chains are heavy but beautiful, like gold; others are small and rusty and less glamourous. But that doesn’t matter because everyone is chained to something – reputation and the opinions of others, wealth, nobility, humility, the beast within. So accept your condition and don’t complain – instead find something good in it because no situation is so bitter that someone who is calm cannot find good in it. Be creative, be clever, apply reason to your situation, and you will find it is less distressing than you thought.

While Seneca wrote that a prison surrounds all of us, Epictetus wrote that Socrates could not be held in prison. “Is any discontented with being alone? let him be in solitude. Is any discontented with his parents? let him be a bad son, and lament. Is any discontented with his children? let him be a bad father. ‘Throw him into prison!’ What prison? Where he is already: for he is there against his will; and wherever a man is against his will, that to him is a prison. Thus Socrates was not in prison, since he was there with his own consent.” (Epictetus, 32) This principle is even in the Bible, when Paul wrote:

Philippians 4:11-12 ...*for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.*

You cannot be in a prison if you are there by your own consent. And being there of your own consent means you don’t complain about it, but you accept it as it is and try to learn something from it.

Marcus Aurelius, Roman Emperor from 161-180, tells us, “Yes, you can – if you do everything as if it were the last thing you were doing in your life, and stop being aimless, stop letting your emotions override what your mind tells you, stop being hypocritical, self-centered, irritable. Do not think that

what is hard for you to master is humanly impossible; but if a thing is humanly possible, consider it to be within your reach.”

“The mind is the ruler of the soul. It should remain unstirred by agitations of the flesh – gentle and violent ones alike. Not mingling with them, but fencing itself off and keeping those feelings in their place.” (Aurelius)

Aurelius advises us not to let any thought come into our minds which has not been well-examined and reminds us that “The mind which is free from passions is a citadel” – it is a safe haven where you can run for refuge.

The works of the Greek and Roman philosophers continued to be taught throughout the centuries, and even in the 1800’s there were philosophers and writers advocating self-denial. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “The man who renounces himself, comes to himself.” And “It is easy in the world to live after the world’s opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.” If you can live by the principles you adopted during a life of solitude while surrounded by the world, you will be a great person.

William James tells us, “Be systematically ascetic. Do something for no other reason than that you would rather not do it.”

What are the common themes in these writings? Certainly living simply with a mind that is free from passions and emotional overindulgence. Ruling over yourself.

What is wrong with that?

2 Peter 1:5-7 *And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity.*

Ascetics have virtue, knowledge, temperance, and patience, but that doesn’t take a person far enough. What’s wrong with asceticism is that it isn’t righteousness, and *it doesn’t make you a good person*. It simply makes you the ruler of your own heart. Asceticism doesn’t add godliness, brotherly love, and charity, which would make you good to other people.

Asceticism can teach you to mortify *some* of the deeds of your flesh (**Colossians 3:5-10**); it can teach you to be “*swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath*” (**James 1:19**); it can teach you to bring all your thoughts into captivity, but not necessarily into obedience to Christ (**2 Corinthians 10:5**); it can teach you to do things you don’t want to do, such as fasting. Many ascetics practiced fasting, so it’s conceivable that they understood that their belly was a god (**Philippians 3:19**), which was made weaker by fasting.

Deuteronomy 8:3 *And he humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna, which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know; that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live.*

God used fasting to teach His people humility, but the Greeks erred in believing that neglecting the body was the POINT. The humbling of the body is only a start – not the goal. In and of itself, it does

nothing. But it is a tool that you can use to train your soul to always choose based on the law, and not based on being a respecter of persons – specifically, being a respecter of your own beast.

These philosophies have a *show* of “*wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body*” (**Colossians 2:23**). And this “*bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable unto all things*” (**1 Timothy 4:8**). Asceticism can be the *beginning* of a life of righteousness, for only if you are the ruler of your beast can you teach it to love others more than itself.